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President Alia Viewed as Top Candidate

Power Struggle for Succession Is Likely

By NORMAN KEMPSTER, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—The death Thursday of Albanian Communist Party leader Enver Hoxha creates a leadership vacuum in that Balkan nation, which is on the front line of the East-West confrontation by its geography but is kept isolated from the world's conflicts by its rigid Marxist ideology.

No immediate successor was announced, although the leading candidate appears to be Ramiz Alia, 60, whose position as president makes him ceremonial head of state. Alia has received considerable public exposure in recent years, while Hoxha assumed the role of elder statesman.

'Ran a Tight Ship'

But the 76-year-old Hoxha seemed reluctant to the last to groom a successor. Albania's principal Communist Party newspaper disclosed just last month that Mehmet Shehu, for years prime minister and the country's No. 2 leader, was executed as a spy in 1981. Originally, his death had been described as suicide.

"Hoxha ran a very tight ship," said George A. Carver, a former CIA official who is a senior fellow of Georgetown University's Center for International and Strategic Studies. "One of the least healthy things to be in that unhealthy country was heir apparent."

"I doubt if the succession will be

peaceful," he said. "If it weren't that people are going to get killed, I'd regard it as funny."

For much of the 40 years since World War II, Albania has been an oddity on the world stage—a Muslim country in the heart of Europe and a rigid Stalinist dictatorship more than three decades after Josef Stalin's death.

But the strategic location of the country, sandwiched between Yugoslavia and Greece and across the Adriatic from Italy, gives it an importance for the Communist Warsaw Pact, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and non-aligned Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union maintained a naval base in Albania before 1964.

"There is no doubt at all that the Soviets, on military grounds, would love to have access to an Albanian port on the Adriatic," said Harry Gelman of the Rand Corp., the Santa Monica-based think tank. "That would not be good news for NATO at all."

"But I'd be surprised if that happened," Gelman said. "Hoxha has tried to select people who agree with him, although it is hard to keep control after you're dead." Hoxha severed relations with the Soviets in the 1960s and with China in 1977.

It seems unlikely that Albania will turn toward the West, although Gelman said it has recently

established some tentative trading ties with Italy. From NATO's viewpoint, he said, the best news would be for Albania to continue its isolation.

There is little chance that Albania will go the way of the independent Communist regime in Yugoslavia because Albania and Yugoslavia have been unfriendly rivals for generations.

"Albania is a poor country; it is an isolated country and it has a very rigid Communist dictatorship," Gelman said. "One of the reasons that the leadership is inclined to maintain the Stalinist control is the presence of the Yugoslav big brother."

U.S. Reaction

The official U.S. reaction was restrained.

"The United States has had no contact with Mr. Hoxha since the period immediately after World War II," State Department spokesman Edward P. Djerejian said. "The United States has had no diplomatic relations with Albania since 1939."

Albania proclaimed its independence in 1912 after a history of domination by the Romans, Byzantines and Ottoman Turks. It was annexed by Italy under Benito Mussolini in 1939, and King Zog, who had ruled the nation since 1925, fled the country.